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SUBJECT: KUMARATUNGA SAYS READY TO SIGN JOINT MECHANISM WITH LTTE

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead for reason 1.4(D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: President Kumaratunga told Ambassador March 17 that she believes establishing a joint mechanism with LTTE for administration of tsunami reconstruction is necessary. One issue remains to be resolved. Once it is, she is ready to sign and does not believe her coalition partner the JVP will walk out as they have threatened. END SUMMARY

12. (C) After discussing reconstruction effort with President Kumaratunga May 17 (septel), Ambassador asked Kumaratunga about status of efforts to reach agreement with the LTTE on a "joint mechanism" for administration of reconstruction effort in North and East. Kumaratunga said she believed such a mechanism was absolutely necessary and they were close to agreement. Only one real substantive issue remained, that of control of the ocean areas. The GSL had proposed that the mechanism cover the area two kilometers inland from the high tide mark. The LTTE responded that there was much debris under the ocean which needed to be cleared. They wanted the area under the mechanism to extend two kilometers out to sea.

13. (C) Kumaratunga said that no government could cede sovereignty over the adjacent seas to a rebel group, so this proposal was unacceptable. The GSL had counter-proposed that a neutral international organization--perhaps a UN agency--be put in charge of clearing the ocean areas. The Norwegians had presented this idea to the LTTE, but they had not yet responded. The response was being slowed down because LTTE negotiator Tamilchelvan was now touring Europe.

14. (C) Ambassador said that we and others in the international community strongly supported the establishment of the mechanism. It was not only crucial for the delivery of reconstruction assistance in the North and East, but could also set a tone which could lead to progress in the peace talks. If she signed, she would have our support.

15. (C) Kumaratunga repeated that she also believed in the necessity of establishing the mechanism. Ambassador asked if she thought her coalition partner, the radical JVP party, would walk out if she signed, as they had threatened. She said they would not--they were bluffing. She claimed that her arch-rival, former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe, was paying JVP members to stir up trouble for her. At any rate, she said, she was the President with the mandate of the people, and there were times when you just had to make a decision.

16. COMMENT: Kumaratunga was forceful and appeared sincere in her determination to go ahead with the joint mechanism agreement. She was also confident that she could bring the JVP to heel. Others in her own party, such as Foreign Minister Kadirgamar, seem less enthused, and we will see if they can find ways to delay things.

LUNSTEAD